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NSA chief takes aim at leakers

'Deadly losses' cited in urging prosecutions

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WASHINGTON — The general who runs America's global electronic-spying apparatus said yesterday that he wants administration leakers and the news organizations they deal with to be prosecuted in federal court when they reveal secrets about this "signals intelligence."

Lt. Gen. William Odom, director of the National Security Agency, said the agency's ability to gather information had been seriously harmed by unauthorized disclosures, but he supplied few details.

"You'll just have to take my word for it," General Odom said during a breakfast session with reporters.

"I see lots of leaking in the administration. . . . Occasionally I see some leaks from the Congress," he said.

"I'm not necessarily for the newspapers to be the first under the gun. The first people who ought to be under the gun on this are the leakers inside the administration. That's where we should start," he said.

The general cited a law that specifically makes it a crime to reveal communications secrets. He said he has unsuccessfully urged the Justice Department to bring prosecutions under that law.

The late William J. Casey, as director of the CIA, specifically warned some news organization that he would seek prosecution, but no cases materialized.

Justice Department lawyers have said publicly that they could bring such cases and make them stick, but privately they say they have not wanted to pick a public fight with the press.

The NSA, headquartered at Fort Meade, uses a worldwide network of devices to eavesdrop on electronic communications of all sorts.

In one of the few specific cases cited by the general, he said his

agency suffered "deadly losses" in its ability to gather intelligence relating to Libya, but he did not elaborate. It was not clear whether he was referring to the Reagan administration's intentional disclosure of an interception of a Libyan diplomatic message concerning the bombing of a West German nightclub.

The disclosure was made to support the aerial bombardment of Libyan targets last year by U.S. warplanes in retaliation for the nightclub bombing.

The NSA director directed his anger in particular at a 1982 book on the agency entitled "The Puzzle Pal-

ace," written by James Bamford. The book, General Odom said, was "on the ready reference shelves" of foreign intelligence agencies that sometimes used it as a guide for their own spying efforts against the agency.

He asked reporters to refrain from identifying the source of information when it comes from signals intelligence and suggested that some elements of the ongoing public debate about arms control should not be discussed in public at all.

The United States and the Soviet Union are moving toward an agreement on eliminating intermediate-range nuclear weapons from their arsenals. A key element of that

agreement will concern verification of its terms.

Some U.S. officials have expressed concern that the Soviets will be able to cheat without being caught. General Odom suggested yesterday that discussion of the verification of any such agreement be largely limited to such bodies as the congressional intelligence committees.

"The more enlightened the verification debate is, the weaker my capability to verify will be," he said, without offering specifics. "A prudent debate can be held . . . — that's why we have intelligence committees — . . . to make those kind of judgments for you."